

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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# Deconstruction Isn't Dead

"What was deconstruction?" is the wrong question to ask.

THE REVIEW | ESSAY

By *Ethan Kleinberg*

There is much at stake in the shift from the present to the past — and so it is with Timothy Brennan's recent *Chronicle* essay, "[What Was Deconstruction?](#)" In the headline's formulation, the end of deconstruction is a starting point, and it is from this safe distance that Brennan works through what he takes deconstruction to *have been*. Brennan begins his essay with an account of an exchange he witnessed between Derrida and Ernesto Laclau after a Laclau lecture on Antonio Gramsci. Brennan tells us he understood "frustratingly little" which, retrospectively, he took to reveal the vacuity of deconstruction or Derrida or both.

There is much at stake in the shift from the present to the past — and so it is with Timothy Brennan's recent *Chronicle* essay, "[What Was Deconstruction?](#)" In the headline's formulation, the end of deconstruction is a starting point, and it is from this safe distance that Brennan works through what he takes deconstruction to *have been*. Brennan begins his essay with an account of an exchange he witnessed between Derrida and Ernesto Laclau after a Laclau lecture on Antonio Gramsci. Brennan tells us he understood "frustratingly little" which, retrospectively, he took to reveal the vacuity of deconstruction or Derrida or both.

But anecdotes are fickle, and I could counter with my own experience attending Derrida's lectures at the University of California at Irvine and seminars where I found him to be a generous and informed teacher. He carefully and patiently guided me to a better understanding of a Dostoevsky story via a discussion of Kierkegaard. Derrida, with his "quizzical eyes" and "faint" smile (as Brennan puts it) helped me to understand a lot. But what do either of these anecdotes reveal about what deconstruction was or is?

Brennan's piece is ostensibly a review of Gregory Jones-Katz's excellent work of intellectual history, *Deconstruction: An American Institution* (University of Chicago Press, 2021), and if Brennan's use of the past tense were restricted to Jones-Katz's account of the history of deconstruction in America it would be warranted. But Brennan's essay is not really a book review. It is a new iteration of four oft-repeated broadsides against deconstruction that moves beyond the purview of Jones-Katz's historical analysis. These critiques are not new but they are persistent, and variants of

each have been enlisted recently across the political spectrum from [“Deconstruction Goes Mainstream”](#) in the right-leaning *National Review* in 2020 to the Marxist scholar Gabriel Rockhill’s [“The CIA Reads French Theory: On the Intellectual Labor of Dismantling the Cultural Left”](#) in a *Los Angeles Review of Books* subchannel in 2017. They have also been employed by [Daniel Dennett](#), Steven Pinker, and Jordan Peterson in their respective critiques of “postmodernism.” Brennan’s piece is exemplary, however, insofar as it mobilizes all four critiques at once.

In broad strokes, these are the four critiques: First, that deconstruction is undefinable and obscure, in Brennan’s words, “a style of thought more complained about than understood, less outrageous than deliberately elusive.” Second, that deconstruction is pernicious because it leads to radical skepticism, relativism, and ultimately post-truth: “There are no answers, no origins, no past, no perpetrators.” Third, that deconstruction neutralizes activist politics in the service of the status quo (“Deconstruction seems most American in giving repressive tolerance philosophical dignity.”) And fourth and finally, that deconstruction is right-wing thought disguised as progressive philosophy: “Deconstruction won credence for the ‘left’ by enlisting the European philosophical right.”

The last two of these critiques can be traced back as far as 1969 when the French philosopher Jean-Pierre Faye’s “Le Camarade Mallarmé” attacked the structuralist journal *Tel Quel* and the work of Derrida published in it as enemies of the French left. The brunt of the attack was the allegation that *Tel Quel* had facilitated the introduction of a “language derived from Germany’s extreme-right” which had been “displaced, unknown to all, and introduced into the Parisian left.” For Faye, Derrida was indicative of “*le malheur Heideggerien*”, the Heideggerian misfortune, which is the appropriation of a right-wing (ultimately National Socialist) philosophy by an ostensibly left-wing philosopher. According to Faye, despite its pronounced support for left-leaning political action and affiliation with the French Communist Party, *Tel Quel* — through the work of Derrida — was surreptitiously leading French youth toward right-wing extremism.

Fredric Jameson’s [“Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”](#) offered a variation on this theme in *New Left Review* in 1984, and in 1994, Joyce Appleby, Lynn

Hunt, and Margaret Jacob appropriated the same critique in their book *Telling the Truth About History*. In [this version](#), deconstruction was deemed inappropriate for the study of history because it ostensibly leads to relativism — but also because Derrida and deconstruction were influenced by Nietzsche and Heidegger who both made “notoriously antidemocratic, anti-Western, and antihumanist pronouncements and were associated sometimes fairly, sometimes not, with anti-Semitism.” The authors are then quick to point out that “Hitler cited Nietzsche in support of his racial ideology, and Heidegger himself joined the Nazi Party.” As with Faye and Jameson, the association with Heidegger is sufficient to stop the analysis.

Brennan himself echoed Faye’s argument in a 2006 *Chronicle* [article](#):

Current fashions in the humanities, despite being labeled Marxist by the media, are nothing of the sort. On the contrary, they draw their inspiration from right-wing philosophers of the 1920s and 1930s. They are in fact deeply hostile to leftist thinking and have actively sought to censor it.

Brennan more recently argues that,

Deconstruction won credence for the ‘left’ by enlisting the European philosophical right; and was widely welcomed by the liberal center of academe because in attacking oppressive credos it was undermining credibility itself.

In doing so, he links Faye’s argument about deconstruction’s right-wing DNA (Critique 4) to a separate dismissal based on the idea that deconstruction leads to radical skepticism and total relativism (Critique 2). This latter argument also appears in the Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob book; in Bruno Latour’s famous 2004 essay “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?,” and in Rita Felski’s 2015 *The Limits of Critique*. These are each “slippery slope” arguments: The critical apparatus of deconstruction, they hold, necessarily slides into a realm of endless critique that blurs the lines between fact and fiction, good and bad, or right and wrong. Works of deconstruction are like Trojan horses: Open Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* and watch out! — little Nazis will come hopping out. On this line of argument, scholars who work with deconstruction are



aiding and abetting the enemy and ultimately enabling authoritarianism. What is neglected in such attacks and dismissals is — of course — any discussion of deconstruction itself as mode of discourse or interpretative approach.



GÉRARD RONDEAU, REDUX

### **Jacques Derrida**

Jones-Katz's book does not tackle this issue directly but it does offer a powerful and convincing historical narrative about how deconstruction took root in America as well as accounts of the intellectual figures and institutions that allowed it to do so. Brennan tethers his dismissal of deconstruction to the institutions and charismatic

figures discussed in the book and by doing so he avoids the question he sets out to answer: What, indeed, was deconstruction? Instead, he decries the damage deconstruction *is* doing to this day as a conduit for right-wing thought that undermines credibility while deactivating emancipatory politics. The accusation is bolstered by descriptions of actual academics culled from Jones-Katz's book but ultimately serves as justification for not engaging with works of deconstruction by Derrida or Paul de Man or current scholars.

Counterintuitively, in addition to deconstruction being a dangerous philosophy, its critics also tell us it is a silly one because it “remains a style of thought more complained about than understood, less outrageous than deliberately elusive” (Critique 1). The rhetorical trick of this dismissal is that it allows those making it to avoid defining deconstruction by asserting that it is impossible to define. To be sure, deconstruction, like much philosophy, is difficult and requires study but does this make it deliberately elusive? What *is* deconstruction? To me it is quite clear.

**T**he deconstructive strategy is to approach a text as a site of contestation and struggle where one tendency in that text asserts itself as the source of order and thus establishes a hierarchy of meaning. The hierarchy is constructed in an oppositional binary that is presented as neutral and thus conceals the organizing principle (good and evil is a simple one). The intention of the author is rendered irrelevant for the deconstruction because the construction of the text may very well lie on unconscious, unquestioned, naturalized, or implicit assumptions that are at work in the ordering process. The deconstruction exposes the binary construct and arbitrary nature of the hierarchy by revealing an exchange of properties between the two tendencies. What's more, much can be gleaned by what is left out of the text, and this, too, can be used to unsettle authoritative pronouncements. I should also note that each of these goals and practices is accepted under different guises by all the critics of deconstruction.

**Deconstruction is not a circumscribed period of time or grouping of thinkers.**

In my book *Haunting History* (Stanford University Press, 2017) I argue for the utility of deconstruction as an approach to the past, and in *Emmanuel Levinas's Talmudic Turn* (Stanford, 2022) I applied that approach. Far from Brennan's assertion that deconstruction holds an "aversion toward situating the movement in its time and place," I contend that deconstruction allows one to grapple with the ways that ideas and concepts drift over time and place leaving traces behind that we later take as original. Deconstruction reveals the moment of decision when the story or argument is structured according to a hierarchical ordering that privileges certain possibilities and discounts others (clear/evasive, stable/relative, modern/postmodern).

In this way, deconstruction reveals the legitimizing strategies of the author while upsetting the authority of any one particular telling. Deconstruction is not itself evasive but it enables us to recognize that much of what we know and even are is. Deconstruction is not the source of post-truth but it is a powerful tool to recognize and analyze the instability of truth regimes. This includes the very real possibility that the current conception of truth and facts as secured by the credibility and unquestioned authority of the expert, the scientist, the historian, has waned such that the epistemic fabric which held this conception of truths and facts firm in relation to the authority of science has become loose, or even undone. In this light, Brennan and other critics of deconstruction are blaming the messenger while doing nothing to address the crisis they ascribe to it. By exposing instability, deconstruction opens the possibility for a response, be it through revision, re-interpretation, or re-evaluation.

Deconstruction is not a circumscribed period of time or grouping of thinkers, even though a history of deconstruction such as Jones-Katz's can tell a story of deconstruction in that way. Instead, I see deconstruction as a perpetually futural gesture toward what comes after our "now." It is a strategy of looking forward and beyond where we are that does not disregard the past — but neither does it fetishize it or finalize it as a "what was." The fiction of a stable past is the fiction of a stable present. If we shift our gaze toward the future, and accept the unstable nature of the present, we see that the deconstructive approach equips us to engage our current climate in a way that looks forward instead of back.



Yes, this entails the decentering of the subject as the locus of stable meaning, but it opens up fields of scholarship and politics to actors (human and nonhuman) who/which had previously been excluded because they did not match the criteria of what a subject should be or how a subject should look. Because the subject is decentered, the hierarchy of subject position cannot be simply inverted (which could replicate the initial logic of exclusion). The sober recognition that truth and facts are socially constructed, thus historically and culturally contingent, likewise forces scholars to consider the way systems of knowledge change or differ across space and time and thus are not cast in stone. The diagnosis of systems of power and the role they play in determining which subjects, truths, and facts are privileged and which are not, likewise provides an entrance into analysis, critique, resistance, or support.

In each case scholars are no longer able to rest on naturalized suppositions of what counts (as subject, fact, truth, authority) based on what “was” but are forced to construct arguments in defense of such assertions that are sufficiently convincing to counter competing claims by looking to what “is.” Yes, these arguments too can be deconstructed, but therein lies the possibility of dialogue even at the cost of recognizing instability and questioning credibility.

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